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RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1773
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SUBJECT: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SURGES AS SOCIETY SIMMERS

¶1. Even as the constitution was being revised on November 12 to guarantee greater political representation for women, violence against women in Algeria was on the rise. According to Farouk Ksentini, the chairman of the government's National Consultative Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (CNCPPDH), the number of reported attacks on women soared to 4500 in the first half of 2008, a significant increase over the previous year. Ksentini advocated on November 24 for more "severe legislation on violence against women." Ksentini elaborated on November 25 in an interview with the Algerian Press Service (APS) that the actual number of cases may be quite higher, since victims often do not complain. Female advocacy groups are appalled by the statistics, and we are told that the few call centers and shelters for battered women that do exist are overwhelmed.

¶2. Article 266 of the 2001 Penal Code takes a tougher stand on assault and battery, making them punishable by up to ten years in prison. In spite of that, Professor Fadela Chitour of the womens' organization Wassila told us on November 25 that current legislation is insufficient and has not curbed violence against women. Chitour insisted in a recent paper that "the absence of laws on the issue favored the continued submissiveness of women" since women are reluctant to come forward, largely out of shame. According to Badia Sator, head of the Rachda womens' association, the absence of laws is certainly a problem but the bigger problem is that violence occurs in the private sphere, "where it is invisible," complicating investigation and prosecution for lawyers, doctors and police officers.

¶3. Kheira Messaoudene, a police captain in the national police (DGSN) office of Child Protection, Delinquency and Women, recently presented on national television the latest DGSN statistics concerning violence against women. In the first half of 2008, 2675 women were victims of physical assault, 1359 were mistreated, 144 suffered sexual violence, 107 were harassed and 4 were killed. She also explained that 15.8 percent of the assailants were spouses or lovers, 4.21 percent were boyfriends, 6 percent were brothers or fathers, while 72 percent were male strangers.

¶4. COMMENT: The DGSN and CNCPPDH statistics only cover reported cases and therefore probably represent the tip of the iceberg, especially given the social taboo on women going public with such charges (the high percentage of cases of attacks by strangers suggests that the cultural reluctance to report them is less pronounced). It seems reasonable to assume that the upward trend is as valid for the silent cases as it is for those on record. Chitour concluded that a variety of factors, including the housing crisis, unemployment and the rise in drug use, have all contributed

to the surge in violence against wives, sisters and daughters. Chitour also highlighted the effects of another important Algerian reality, the "dark decade" of violence in the 1990s. The daily violence and trauma of the 1990s, she said, completely distorted the concept of violence, "and in a society where family and educational landmarks disappear, violence is unfortunately becoming the only channel for communication."

PEARCE